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Bragging on Facebook: The interaction of content source and focus

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Abstract

Warranting Theory proposes that third-party testimonials are more influential in online impression formation than target-authored statements. Individuals posting content on social media accurately convey their offline personality while endeavouring to present themselves in a positive light. In doing so they may misjudge the psychological distance of the majority of viewers, who could view this positive self-presentation as bragging and form resultant negative impressions. In this study, we asked 136 participants to view the Facebook timelines of four female targets. Timeline content varied by source (owner- vs. friend-authored) and focus (generally positive vs. personally positive). Participants were tasked with forming impressions of targets and rating them on attractiveness, confidence, modesty, and popularity. We found that source and focus played distinct roles in impression formation. More positive impressions were formed when owner-authored content was general, and when friend-authored content was personal. This highlights the role played by content focus on impression formation, and the potentially damaging effect of perceived bragging. These results are discussed in relation to the application of the Warranting Theory of impression formation online, and discrepancies between these results and those from related articles are examined.

Keywords: Facebook, bragging, impression formation, source, warranting theory

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have become a ubiquitous medium for social interaction, complimenting and extending off-line social space. These sites allow users, via various affordances, to interact and share content online¹. The largest is Facebook with 1.7 billion active users². Individuals typically utilize such sites to project their offline personality and extend existing offline connections³. Viewers can thus form accurate, valid impressions of SNS profile- or timeline-owners solely from their online space^{4,5}. While SNS users accurately portray their personalities online, they also try to project positive impressions of themselves⁶ and those who excessively self-promote risk a negative backlash. We investigate bragging (positive, owner-authored, personally focused content) on impression formation by manipulating the source and focus of positive Facebook timeline content and measuring the perceived attractiveness, confidence, modesty, and popularity of timeline owners.

Warranting Theory^{7,8,9,10} hypothesises that online, as in offline environments, targets' self-disclosures will be attributed less weight than third party testimonials during impression formation, as they are considered less reliable and more likely to misrepresent the target. Facebook is an ideal medium in which to test this: the theory predicts that friend-authored comments will carry more weight than similar owner-authored statements (e.g., a post: "*OMG you're such a good friend*" would lead to a more favourable impression than an update: "*OMG I'm such a good friend*"). Friends' comments on SNSs are influential cues of personality (e.g., extraversion¹⁰) and social⁻⁹, physical^{-9,10}, and task-attractiveness^{9,11}; although exact findings have varied between studies^{9,10,11}.

Individuals predominantly post positive content online^{12,13,14}, accurately expressing their personality but engaging in acquisitive positive self-presentation⁶. This behaviour is intended to positively influence others' opinions, but often backfires as relevant estimates

of psychological distance are misjudged¹⁵. Criticisms are increasingly being voiced against individuals who brag about their achievements online, suggesting that excessive self-promotion may lead to dislike^{16,17}.

Some previous experiments investigating online impression formation only used stimuli in which profile owners positively self-present¹⁸. Most, however, included positive *and* negative content, manipulating this, sometimes together with source (owner- vs. friend-authored), while confounding focus (general statement vs. focus on the timeline owner). The reported effects of content source and valence on online impression formation have been inconsistent. Walther et al.⁹ found ratings of social attractiveness were influenced by valence only, but valence interacted with target gender to influence ratings of physical attractiveness. Rosenthal-Stott¹¹ found friend-authored, and positively valenced, content most affected judgments of social attractiveness, owner-authored content affected judgments of physical attractiveness, and task attractiveness was influenced only by valence.

Walther et al. (2008)⁹ manipulated the valence of friends' comments. While both negative statements were personally focused, one positive comment was personal 'You rock, life of the party', the other was general 'Going to Vegas soon'. Rosenthal-Stott et al. (2015)¹¹ manipulated the valence (positive, negative, neutral) of friend-authored posts and owner-authored updates on female targets' Facebook timelines. Valence was conveyed via an adjective describing the timeline owner, making their positive stimuli equivalent to the personal focused stimuli in the current experiment.

Incongruent findings may be due to variations in experimental manipulations and confounds in content focus. Specifically, positive, owner-authored, personal focused content may be viewed as disingenuous self-presentation (i.e., bragging) and lead to negative impression formation. The current study utilized a factorial design to explore the

role played by the focus, as well as the source, of Facebook timeline content on impression formation. Each participant viewed four Facebook timelines representing female targets. Timelines contained either four owner-authored status updates or four friend-authored posts. All content was positive in valence, but was either generally positive, or positively described the timeline owner. Participants rated each target on measures of attractiveness, previously shown to be impacted by the source of online information¹¹, as well as confidence, modesty and popularity. We predict that focus and source will differentially influence impression formation, and that bragging will negatively affect perceptions of attractiveness.

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty six volunteers (98 females; age 16-62, $M=27.49$, $SD=12.26$) participated in this study. Their nationalities were: 93.4% British, 5.9% European, 0.7% Mixed. All used Facebook at least once weekly.

Design

A 2 (Source: Owner-, Friend-authored) x 2 (Focus: Personal, General) within-participants design was used. Dependent variables were measures of Physical-, Social- and Task-Attractiveness and Confidence, Modesty, and Popularity.

Five-item, seven-point Likert-scale measures taken from McCroskie & McCain (1974)¹⁹ measured Social- (e.g., "I think he/she) could be a friend of mine"), Physical- (e.g., "I find him (her) very attractive physically"), and Task-Attractiveness (e.g., "I have confidence in his (her) ability to get the job done"). Confidence (shy-confident), Modesty (arrogant-modest), and

Popularity (unpopular-popular) were each measured on single-item, seven-point semantic differential scales with 7 representing 'confident', 'modest', and 'popular'.

Materials and Procedure

Participants viewed screenshots of four female Facebook timelines generated by the researchers and each containing either four owner-authored updates, or four friend-authored posts. Manipulated content was always positive in nature. On each timeline all updates/posts either described the timeline owner positively (e.g., "That's me looking absolutely glamorous and ready to party with my favourites for my 21st") or were generally positive statements (e.g., "I love BT sports for showing basketball! Can't wait for the season to start"). Prior norming experiments produced means for each group of experimental statements from 1-Negative to 7-Positive: Owner-Personal = 5.94; Friend-Personal = 5.81, Owner-General = 5.45; Friend-General = 5.49; and from 1-Impersonal to 7-Personal: Owner-Personal = 5.12; Friend-Personal = 5.38, Owner-General = 3.29; Friend-General = 3.19. All items and their ratings are presented in the appendix. These findings confirm the validity of the stimuli used as they show that all stimuli are perceived as equally positive, while the stimuli in the 'personal' condition are perceived as being more personal.

All other timeline details (e.g., profile picture, number of friends and photos) were controlled and counterbalanced. Timelines included the target's name, profile picture, and banner across the top; a left hand column consisting of the 'about' section (the towns they came from and currently live in), 9 thumbnail photos, 6 thumbnail 'friends' photos; a central column containing the manipulated posts/comments; and a right hand column containing 3 adverts. Profile pictures came from a pre-normed set and were selected to be of middling attractiveness. Banner pictures were normed in a previously unpublished study by the authors and were selected for their neutrality. The majority of thumbnail photos in each

condition were group shots. There were two version of the questionnaire, presenting timelines to participants in one of two pseudo-random orders. If one 'shell' timeline appeared in version 1 of the experiment in the owner-general condition, then it appeared in version 2 in the friend-personal condition. Stimuli were presented, and measures recorded, online via SurveyMonkey, which participants accessed via links on Facebook and Twitter.

Results

We conducted six 2 (Source: Owner, Friend) x 2 (Focus: Personal, General) repeated measures ANOVAs on the three measures of Attractiveness and Modesty, Confidence, and Popularity. All means and SDs are presented in Table 1. The ANOVA results are presented in Table 2 and are summarized below.

Table 1

Mean (Standard Deviation) Ratings for Social-, Physical- and Task-Attractiveness, Modesty, Confidence, and Popularity

	Owner		Friend	
	Personal	General	Personal	General
Soc Attract	22.19(5.29)	23.51(4.97)	24.39(4.92)	22.28(4.56)
Phy Attract	22.13(3.87)	23.15(3.19)	22.01(3.79)	21.79(3.62)
Task Attract	19.13(2.02)	19.51(1.79)	18.67(2.26)	19.35(1.79)
Modesty	3.92(1.63)	4.07(1.25)	4.77(1.43)	4.46(1.19)
Confidence	5.39(1.57)	5.05(1.31)	4.58(1.29)	4.07(1.36)
Popularity	4.68(1.27)	4.80(1.19)	5.43(1.39)	4.81(1.19)

Social-, Physical-, & Task-Attractiveness ratings /35; Modesty, Confidence, & Popularity ratings /7.

Social, Physical, and Task Attractiveness

Timeline owners were rated as more physically- and task-attractive when their timelines contained Owner-authored updates ($M_{PA}=22.64$, $M_{TA}=19.32$) compared to Friend-

authored comments ($M_{PA}=21.92$, $M_{TA}=19.01$). Owners were also rated higher on Task-attractiveness when content focus was General ($M_{TA}=19.43$) vs. Personal ($M_{TA}=18.89$).

Bonferroni follow-up comparisons were carried out to investigate the Source x Focus interactions for Social- and Physical-attractiveness. Owners were rated more Socially-attractive if content was general owner-authored, or personal friend-authored: within Friend, Personal resulted in higher ratings than General focus [$F=20.57$, $p<0.001$], and within Owner, General resulted in higher ratings than Personal focus [$F=5.15$, $p<0.05$].

Owners were rated more Physically Attractive when they posted General content themselves. Within Owner, General content produced higher Physical Attractiveness ratings than Personal [$F=12.04$, $p<0.001$], and within General, Owner updates produces higher ratings than Friends' posts [$F=23.94$, $p<0.001$]. All other comparisons were not significant [all $ps>0.1$].

Table 2: Main Effects and Interactions

	Source			Focus			Source x Focus		
	F	p	η^2	F	p	η^2	F	p	η^2
Social Attractiveness	2.350	0.128	0.017	22.243	0.300	0.008	23.586	0.000*	0.149
Physical Attractiveness	10.631	0.001*	0.073	2.844	0.094	0.021	12.605	0.001*	0.085
Task Attractiveness	3.957	0.049*	0.028	11.316	0.001*	0.077	0.892	0.347	0.007
Modesty	23.876	0.000*	0.150	0.505	0.478	0.004	4.035	0.047*	0.029
Confidence	71.936	0.000*	0.348	15.269	0.000*	0.102	0.659	0.418	0.005
Popularity	12.821	0.000*	0.087	5.653	0.019*	0.040	18.503	0.000*	0.121

F-values, p-values, and measures of effect size for the 2 (Source: Owner, Friend) x 2 (Focus: Personal, General) ANOVAs on measures of Social-, Physical- and Task-Attractiveness, Modesty, Confidence, and Popularity. Significant effects marked with *.

Confidence, Modesty, and Popularity

Owners were rated higher on Modesty and Popularity, but lower on Confidence, based on Friends-authored comments ($M_{Mod}=4.62$, $M_{Pop}=5.12$, $M_{Con}=4.33$) than Owner-authored updates ($M_{Mod}=3.99$, $M_{Pop}=4.74$, $M_{Con}=5.22$). Ratings of Confidence and Popularity were higher when Focus was Personal ($M_{Con}=4.99$, $M_{Pop}=5.06$) vs. General ($M_{Con}=4.56$, $M_{Pop}=4.81$).

Bonferroni follow-up comparisons were carried out to investigate the interactions for Modesty and Popularity. Higher ratings were generally associated with Personal content posed by Friends. Owners were rated higher on Modesty when content was friend- vs. owner-authored within both the General [$F=7.57$, $p<0.05$] and Personal [$F=19.33$, $p<0.001$] Focus conditions. Within Friend, owners were rated more Modest when content was Personal vs. General [$F=5.02$, $p<0.05$]. There was no difference with the Owner condition [$p>0.1$].

Owners were rated as more Popular when content was Friend- vs. Owner-authored. Within Friend, Personal resulted in higher ratings than General focused content [$F=18.52$, $p<0.001$]; within Personal, popularity ratings were higher with Friend- vs. owner-authored content [$F=31.45$, $p<0.001$]. No other comparisons were significant [all $ps>0.1$].

Discussion

Our study aimed to investigate online impression formation by manipulating the source and focus of Facebook timeline content and measuring perceptions of timeline owners. Source and focus had disparate influences and often interacted to effect

perceptions of timeline owners. Overall, more positive impressions were formed when owner-authored content was general, and when friend-authored content was personal.

The highest ratings of modesty and popularity resulted from personal friend-authored comments, while personal owner-authored updates resulted in higher perceived confidence. This adds to our knowledge of the online application of Warranting Theory⁸. Previous studies suggested that friend-authored comments relating to personality would always carry more weight than owner-authored content¹⁰. Our results suggest that content carries more weight if it is personally focused (therefore containing information about the timeline owner). It may be the case that for some traits (e.g., confidence) owner-authored updates are viewed as genuine self-expression and are most influential, while others (e.g., modesty, popularity) may require more objective information (comparatively impartial third-party testimonials) to judge.

Timeline owners were rated higher on attractiveness when their timelines contained general owner-authored content. Personal friend-authored comments also positively influenced perceived social- but not physical-attractiveness. Ratings of task-attractiveness increased when content was both owner-authored and general focused. This further refutes Warranting Theory's proposition that friend-authored content always carries more weight in online impression formation, demonstrating the important role played by focus. One possible explanation is that perceived bragging leads to more negative impression formation. By posting positive content focused on themselves, timeline owners may successfully convey certain personality characteristics they possess, but be perceived as less attractive because their assertions are perceived as bragging, an unattractive feature.

Previous studies typically manipulated source and/or valence of online content^{9,11} but the current results demonstrate that focus interacts with source and may help to

explain inconsistencies in previous findings. Rosenthal-Stott et al. (2015)¹¹ found positive friend-authored comments more influential for social attractiveness, and owner-authored updates more influential for physical-attractiveness. Their content was all personal-focused, making their positive conditions equivalent to the owner- and friend-personal conditions in the current study, and their findings are consistent with the results presented here. They state that friend-authored information drives impression-formation on social attractiveness, but we show that focus is also important, with owner-authored content also generating favourable impressions of social attractiveness when that content is general rather than personal (therefore not bragging). Both results diverge from the findings of Walther et al. (2008)⁹ who found friend-authored content most influential for physical attractiveness, though they presented only other-generated content and confounded focus.

Whereas Rosenthal-Stott¹¹ found no impact of source on task-attractiveness, we found friend-authored content increased perceived task-attractiveness, as did general focus. This further demonstrates the impact of focus in online impression formation, and highlights the potentially damaging consequences of online bragging. Discrepancies between the studies may relate to the specific nature of the stimuli content. We suggest future research manipulate source and focus concurrently to further investigate this relationship, while also exploring possible interactions with valence and gender. Further research could also focus on which personality dimensions are perceived as genuine when viewed in owner-authored updates, and try to determine how dimensions are perceived positively or negatively online, as this may differ from offline contexts.

Possible limitations of the current experiment include the single-item measures of confidence, modesty, and popularity. While multi-item measures exist for some measures (e.g., attractiveness¹⁹) bipolar single-item measures are common in this field of research

where no multi-item measures exist^{20,21,22,23} and have been proved to be as reliable as many multi-item measures²⁴. Also, the negative impact of perceived bragging may be enhanced, or even apply exclusively, in zero-acquaintance relationships (when targets are unfamiliar) especially if driven by psychological distance¹⁵. Because individuals are online friends with disparate groups (e.g., friends, family, colleagues) genuine self-presentations may be aimed at one specific group, and subsequently miss-interpreted by others – the majority of online viewers – who have less knowledge of the target²⁵. Participants in the current experiment were unfamiliar with targets, so effects of perceived bragging may have been exaggerated compared to close online groups, although the findings are relevant to unfamiliar targets being judged as potential friends or employees^{20,23,26}.

In conclusion, the source and focus of SNS content interact to influence impression formation. Timeline owners are perceived more positively if self-authored content on their timeline is general, and friend-authored content is specifically about them. Positive, personal-focused, self-authored content can be perceived as bragging, particularly by those psychologically distant from the target, and can negatively impact impressions formed.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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Appendix

The table below contains the stimuli which appeared in each of the four conditions of the experiment (Personal friend-authored, general friend-authored, personal self-authored, and general self-authored) together with their ratings from the norming studies carried out to determine valence and focus. Thirty-six participants (26 female; mean age = 24.31, SD = 6.69) who did not take part in the main experiment were asked to rate each statement on a scale of Negative (1) to Positive (7). A separate group of 28 participants (15 female; mean age = 30.21, SD = 13.29) who did not take part in the main experiment were asked to rate each statement on a scale of Impersonal (1) to Personal (7) based on what extent they thought the focus of the update/post was on an individual or a situation. The table below presents the mean and SD of valence and focus for each item, as well as the mean and SD for each of the four conditions.

	Valence Rating (1 Negative – Positive 7)		Focus Rating (1 Impersonal – Personal 7)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Personal Friend-Authored				
1. “You have been far too good to me! You are the best and I can’t thank you enough.”	5.97	1.21	5.14	1.96
2. “I appreciate everything you do and have done for me, thank you for picking me back up when I am at my lowest.”	5.72	1.36	6.11	1.37
3. “I don’t know what I would do without you, you are such an amazing friend.”	5.83	1.33	5.29	1.63
4. “You are an inspirational person after what you have accomplished through all you have put up with.”	5.58	1.36	4.96	1.79
Total	5.81	0.75	5.38	1.49
Personal Owner-Authored				
1. “ Purchasing my first size ten clothes since the days of Irish Dancing, It’s a great sense of accomplishment.”	5.89	1.24	4.93	1.54
2. “That’s me look absolutely glamorous and ready to party with my favourites for my 21st.”	5.61	1.34	4.89	1.64
3. “ That was the best gig I have ever played in my life! That was beyond incredible! Thanks to everyone who came.”	6.39	1.10	4.96	1.89
4. “I can’t believe I got the job! Finally someone has realised that I am actually good at what I do.”	5.81	1.37	5.71	1.41

Total	5.94	0.83	5.12	1.24
General Friend-Authored				
1. "I am having a good night at the beach with a hot chocolate, marshmallows and a fire lit."	5.39	1.52	2.79	1.26
2. "Watching the sunset over New York on our last night. I am so content right now."	5.25	1.36	3.93	1.43
3. "Just booked to go to Florida in November for thanks giving! Super excited, can't wait."	5.72	1.39	2.93	1.56
4. "Sitting in the SSE Hydro waiting for the Harlem Globetrotters to start. Feeling excited."	5.47	1.29	3.14	1.48
Total	5.49	1.13	3.19	0.92
General Owner-authored				
1. "I feel sorry for people who don't have friends like mine, they are always there for me and can't help me enough."	4.67	1.41	3.96	2.25
2. "We have had lunch and the Shopping is complete. Now to sit and have dinner, very successful day in town."	5.58	1.40	2.43	1.19
3. " Having some lovely family time before everyone goes back to work on Monday. The time off has been good."	5.97	1.32	3.93	1.86
4. "I love BT sports for showing basketball! Can't wait for the season to start"	5.42	1.34	2.86	1.67
Total	5.45	1.09	3.29	1.06